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ABSTRACT

One of a series of children's books written from the point of view of an elementary grade child with a disability or other problem, the stories emphasize the similarities in childhood experience while providing information specific to the disability. In this book a fifth-grader, Scott, reveals in this diary how he copes with his asthma and the outcome of his encounter with a homeless person in the library. After the story, a question and answer section provides answers (by Scott) of typical questions children often have about asthma. These include: "What is asthma?" "What do you mean by an asthma episode?" "What do you do when you have an episode?" "Is it scary?" "Is there a cure for asthma?" "What is an inhaler?" "If exercise triggers asthma, how can you play sports?" "Is it true that you can make an episode happen?" "Will you outgrow your asthma?" "Isn't it terrible to have asthma?" (DB)

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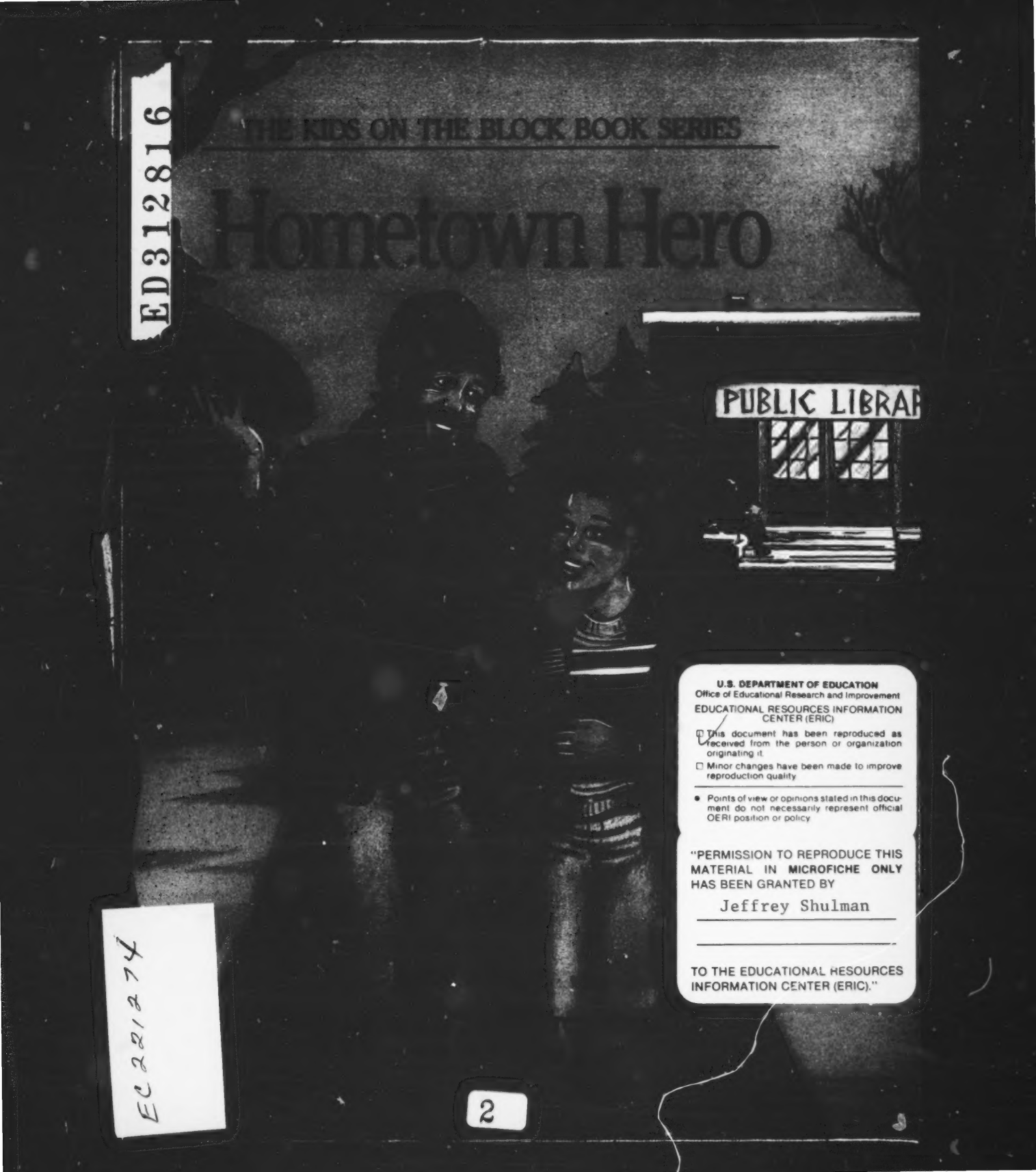
THE KIDS ON THE BLOCK BOOK SERIES

Hometown Hero



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Hometown Hero

Meet
SCOTT

Birthday: January 20

Best friends:

The Empty Hands Karate Club
(Brian, Sarah, Mark, Jason, Jinx, Michael, and Robbie)

Hobbies:

Keeping my journal
Riding in Grandpop's car
Watching Bruce Lee movies

Sports:

Karate, of course
Bike riding, swimming, and soccer

Favorite food (Yum!):

Turkey, stuffing, and gravy
More turkey, stuffing, and gravy
Pumpkin pie
("Don't forget the whipped cream!")

Favorite subjects:

Science

Yuck!:

Lima beans
Cold, cold weather
("A real asthma trigger")

Scott Whittaker

THE KIDS ON THE BLOCK BOOK SERIES

Hometown Hero

Featuring Scott Whittaker

Barbara Aiello and Jeffrey Shulman
Illustrated by Loel Barr

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BOOKS
FREDERICK, MARYLAND

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The Kids on the Block Book Series is available at quantity discounts with bulk purchase for educational, charitable, business, or sales promotional use. For information, please write to: Marketing Director, Twenty-First Century Books, 38 South Market Street, Frederick, Maryland, 21701.

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(The Kids on the Block book series)

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[Fic]—dc20

To the children who teach us about differences—
and similarities

Dear Reader:

Who are The Kids on the Block? They are kids like you. They like to do the same things you do. They share your hopes and fears. And like you, they have differences. You'll meet kids who are blind or have cerebral palsy. You'll meet kids who are deaf or have asthma. And you'll meet kids whose lives have been changed by divorce or drugs.

In The Kids on the Block Book Series, you'll find their stories. You'll read stories about friendship and growing up, stories about changes and challenges. But you won't read about kids who are dependent, and you won't read about superheroes, either. The Kids on the Block are regular kids leading regular lives.

"I'm not an epileptic," one kid says. "I'm a person with epilepsy." And that is the point. These kids are people: different in the same ways that we are all different, alike in the same ways that we are all alike.

We hope you enjoy their stories.

Barbara Aiello
Jeffrey Shulman

My Journal

Thursday, November 24

Dear Diary,

Turkey Day! This has to be my favorite day of the year. Next to my birthday, of course. And Christmas. Oh, and the karate championship and the Sports Awards Dinner. And—well, it's one of my favorite days of the year.

Today was a great day. We rode our bikes through the park. It was bright and clear and cold. I was afraid it might be a little too cold for me. But I used my inhaler, and my asthma didn't bother me a bit. The park is really neat. There's a bike path that weaves in and out of the trees. It was like riding over a carpet of fallen leaves. Did I say leaves? I meant to say, millions of leaves! Red, orange, and yellow. Where do they all come from? I mean, I know *where* they come from—there were just so many of them.

I don't know why it is, but I always think of the fall as *my* season. Most kids like summer the best, I guess. (After all, no school *is* a pretty big plus.) But, to me, there's just something about the fall. The air feels so clean and cool, and the sunshine is warm enough to make you forget that winter's right around the corner. Of course, it's kind of sad, too. The leaves fall, the daylight grows short. Mom says it's the thoughtful time of year. I don't know why it is, but on a bright fall day I just feel determined to make something happen.

Grandma and Pop were there when we got home. Pop drives the oldest car you ever saw. He says it's a classic. Grandma says it's just old. "Well, so are we," Pop always says back. "Anything

wrong with that?" And Grandma just laughs. Pop and Grandma are fun to have around, and Grandma makes the best pumpkin pie in the world. Maybe that's why I like the fall so much. It's the season for warm pumpkin pie and vanilla ice cream.

Pop made a fire to warm things up inside. About the only time we have the fireplace working is when Pop visits. "You've just got to have the knack," he says. "Hey, Scott, maybe you can break up this firewood with that karate stuff of yours." "That karate stuff," he calls it. "Beats me," he likes to say, "a grown boy busting boards in his pjs. It sure beats me."

"Not pajamas, Grandpop," I try to tell him. "It's called a gi. You say it like the word 'geese.' And I don't bust boards."

"Well," he laughs, "it sure looks like pjs to me."

Dinner was bigger and better than ever. Turkey, of course. And sweet potatoes, and cranberries, and Mom's specialty: stuffing with apples and nuts. I was ready to be stuffed myself, but Dad wanted to say a prayer of thanks before we ate. It's a family tradition. "Maybe this year," Dad said, "we should go around the table and all say what we're most thankful for."

"Dad—" Megan, and RJ, and I started to complain. I mean, you can carry these family traditions a little too far.

"Well," Dad said, giving up on the idea, "it worked on 'The Cosby Show.' "

I said my thanks to myself. And I had a lot to be thankful for. I was mostly thankful that my asthma seemed to be getting better. (I haven't had a real bad episode in a long time. Maybe those windpipes have finally grown, after all.) I was in charge of my own treatment now. It was Dr. Hernandez's idea for me to fill in a daily asthma chart. It shows how well I'm breathing, if there are any signs of asthma trouble, and what medicines I take. "It

will help put you in control of your asthma," Dr. Hernandez explained, "and not your asthma in control of you."

Dr. Hernandez also suggested I give karate a try. He said the breathing exercises would help with my asthma. "Good for the body, good for the soul," he said.

And it was Dr. Hernandez who said it would be a good idea for me to keep this journal. "It will help us to understand your asthma better," he said. "But this is more than a record of your asthma. It's a place to keep a record of your thoughts—a place to keep a record of you! After all, there's more to Scott Whittaker than asthma, isn't there?"

I remember what I first thought about that idea: not much! "Diaries are for girls," I complained to him. I could just hear the guys laughing now: "Scott's too busy to play baseball. He's got to go write in his diary."

"So diaries are just for girls," Dr. Hernandez replied. "Well, I can think of a few people who would be surprised to hear that."

"Like who?" I asked suspiciously.

"For starters, how about Christopher Columbus and George Washington?"

"Not bad," I said, "for starters."

So here I am. Christopher Columbus, George Washington, and, now, Scott Whittaker: great diary keepers of the world.

9:30: A few minutes of deep breathing. Waves in, waves out. Then, lights out.

Friday, November 25

Dear Diary,

It came today! My invitation to the Woodburn School Sports Awards Dinner. December 10. I wouldn't miss this for the world.

The Karate Club was something new at Woodburn. I tried to start the club last year, but Mr. Yoder, the principal, didn't like the idea—at all. I guess he thought it was too rough. "Karate?" Mr. Yoder asked. "Is that really a sport?"

"It's the art of self-defense," I told him.

"Is somebody bothering you at school?" Mr. Yoder asked.

"No, it's not that," I said. I wanted to explain about karate. Most people don't understand that karate isn't about fighting. My teacher—I mean, my sensei—says that karate is learning how *not* to fight. "Karate teaches a different kind of strength," my sensei says, "a strength from within." I wanted to explain all this, but I really didn't think it would do any good. Some people just don't want to understand.

But this year we got a new principal. I figured he would see things the same way Mr. Yoder did. But I also figured, what did I have to lose? So that's how I found myself, on my first day in the fifth grade, asking to see Dr. Mathewson. Well, I was in for a surprise. Better make that three surprises.

First of all, *he* turned out to be a *she*. That was my first surprise. "A karate club?" she asked. I thought: I know, it's too rough, it's too tough. I was about to describe the dojo kun—the karate code of conduct—when Dr. Mathewson looked me in the eye and announced, "What an excellent idea!" That's what she said, all right. That was my second surprise. "But," she started to say—here comes the big "but," I thought—"but you will need supervision," she went on. "The way of bushido is not easy." The

way of bushido! I couldn't believe my ears. Dr. Mathewson knew karate. Surprise number three! And when she bowed before me, in the traditional standing bow, I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Don't look so shocked," Dr. Mathewson said. "I've been practicing karate since I was—well, I've been practicing for a long time." We sat down to discuss plans for the karate club. "Have you thought of a name for the club?" she asked me.

"I was thinking of The Empty Hands." That's what "karate" means: "the way of the empty hand." Only the hands and feet are used, and only for self-defense.

"That's good," she said. "Now, how many people at Woodburn practice karate? Will this be a big club?"

I squirmed in my chair. "Well," I said softly, "I know two people who would be interested."

"You and me?" Dr. Mathewson asked.

"Me and you," I replied. Dr. Mathewson smiled and said, "Well, we'll just have to find some more Woodburn karateka, won't we?"

"Sounds good to me," I exclaimed. We shook hands, and Dr. Mathewson asked if I would be on the Sports Awards Dinner committee, to help make the final arrangements and find a speaker—things like that. They had been planning the dinner since the middle of summer. "Would I?" I asked excitedly. It wasn't really a question. "You bet!" was my answer. I was so happy I did flying side-kicks the whole way home.

And now my first invitation to the awards dinner. It was going to be a night to remember. What did the dojo kun say? "Always trust the spirit of karate."

9:00: A few minutes of deep breathing. Lights out.

Yes, it was going to be a night to remember.

Saturday, November 26

Dear Diary,

I went to the library with my cousin Brenda today. Mr. Beame, my fifth-grade teacher, gave us plenty of homework for the Thanksgiving break. "This is no time for idle hands," he said. "Or idle heads."

The Woodburn Public Library was crowded, and Brenda and I sat together near the newspaper and magazine section. Not far from us sat a funny looking man. "Funny" isn't the right word. I mean, there wasn't really anything funny about him. He looked like a big heap of old and dirty clothes. *He* looked old and dirty, too. At his feet was a bag with all this stuff in it. I couldn't tell if he was sleeping or not.

"Pssst," I whispered to Brenda. "Check this guy out."

Brenda looked disgusted. "He's a bum" was all she said. She went back to her work.

I kept staring at him. I don't know why, but I just couldn't seem to take my eyes off of him. A real bum in the Woodburn Library, I thought.

"Pssst," I whispered again. "Maybe he needs help."

"What he needs," Brenda said, "is a bath! And I don't think you can help him with that."

He needed a bath, all right. I couldn't argue with Brenda. But why did I keep on looking at him? Part of the karate code of conduct kept going through my mind: "We shall always show respect to all . . ."

The man opened his eyes and saw me staring at him. "Something the matter?" he asked in a grizzly kind of growl, like a bear wakened up in the middle of winter.

"Uh, no," I said, quickly sticking my head in my notebook. Brenda gave me a dirty look, the kind of look that said, "That's what you get for not minding your own business." I was a little scared. What if he gets angry? I thought. What if he comes over here? But when I looked back up, he had closed his eyes again. He was back in his cave. He was still there when Brenda and I left the library.

"You're awfully quiet tonight, Scott," Mom said at dinner. "Is something the matter?"

The same thing he asked. "No, nothing," I finally answered.

But something was the matter. Something *is* the matter. I keep thinking about Brenda's "bum." I keep seeing him wrapped up in those dirty clothes, next to his dirty bag of stuff.

9:15: A few minutes of deep breathing. Hard to focus tonight. Lights out.

The library closed hours ago. I wonder where he is now.

Sunday, November 27

Dear Diary,

I practiced some karate blocking techniques with Dad today. He's a pretty good sport.

I finished my homework for school tomorrow. Tomorrow? Where did the holiday go?

Reminder: There's a meeting of the awards dinner committee on Tuesday.

The Redskins lost. Again.

Another reminder: Tell Mom to renew my prescription for cromolyn again.

9:00: Deep breathing. Tired tonight. Lights out.

I wonder where he is now.

Monday, November 28

Dear Diary,

I woke up with a cough today. Forgot to take last night's medication. Note to myself: "Don't let that happen again!"

December is always an exciting time at Woodburn. You can begin to feel the holiday spirit in the air.

I walked past the Woodburn Library on my way home from school. I didn't really have to, but it wasn't much out of the way, either. I thought I might go in.

But I didn't.

9:15: Deep breathing. Lights out.

Why should I care about some bum sleeping in the library?

Tuesday, November 29

Dear Diary,

The Sports Awards Dinner planning committee met today. Dr. Mathewson, Mr. Mohammadi, Mark Riley, Jinx Braxton, and Coach Kontos. Oh, and me!

We decided on a theme: it was "Profiles in Courage." Coach Kontos thought he just might be able to get Doug Williams, the Washington Redskins quarterback, to speak. Can you believe it?

And that wasn't all. The awards dinner committee—really, Dr. Mathewson—asked The Empty Hands (there were eight of us now) to put on a karate demonstration. There would be hard and soft kata. "But no sparring, no freefighting," she said.

"And no breaking bricks with your heads, please," added Mr. Mohammadi. "I have enough headaches around here already."

This really *is* going to be a night to remember!

We meet again next week.

I walked by the library again. I thought I might go in.

This time I did.

I don't know why. Maybe it was just curiosity. I had seen people like this before. I remember last summer, when we were at Ocean City. There's this great boogie board shop, Ride the Wild Surf, around 39th Street. I used to go there almost every day. But there was always this woman on the street nearby, just standing there and sort of talking to herself. She wore a heavy winter coat (in the middle of summer!) and carried two shopping bags of I don't know what with her. I stayed far away from her.

When Mr. Beame's class went on a field trip to Washington, D.C., we had to walk around some people sleeping on heating grates near the Capitol. Near the Capitol of the United States! It was weird.

So I had seen them before. But not here, not in the middle of Woodburn, sleeping in the Woodburn Public Library. Not close up. I guess it was just curiosity, after all.

He was sitting right where he was before. It didn't seem like he ever moved. I sat down near him. Not too close, but . . . close enough. Brenda was right about one thing: he sure could use a bath. He was pretty dirty, all right, but I couldn't tell if he was a real old guy or not. He was so wrapped up you couldn't get a really good look at him.

I guess I tried too hard.

"So, it's you again," he muttered, catching me by surprise. I jumped in my seat. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"Then quit staring and let me be. The last thing I need is some kid staring at me. I need some sleep."

"Don't you have a home?" I asked. I didn't *mean* to say anything. I just did.

He was as surprised as I was. Suspicious, I think. Mean, maybe. "As a matter of fact, no," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why what?"

"Why don't you have a home?"

"Because I don't," he grumbled. He seemed to get a funny, faraway look in his eyes. "Because," he said a little less harshly, "I lost my job. Because I lost my house."

"But couldn't you get help?" I asked.

"You sure ask a lot of questions, don't you?" I suppose I did. I sure had a lot of questions. "Look at it this way," he continued, "if I could get help, do you think I'd be sitting here all day?" He closed his eyes again.

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I guess not, I thought. I was supposed to be home before dark, but there was something else I had to do. I just couldn't leave yet. "Scott," I said.

He opened his eyes slowly. "What?" he asked.

"Scott," I said again. "My name's Scott Whittaker."

He was quiet for a long time. Still suspicious, I thought. But not mean, I didn't think. Not really.

Finally, he spoke. He spoke softly, but clearly. "Bill," he said. "My name is Bill Waters."

9:00: Deep breathing. Lights out.

I still don't know why I should care. It doesn't make sense. But good night, Bill.

Wednesday, November 30

Dear Diary,

You should have seen The Empty Hands when I told them about the karate demonstration. You should have heard them! Karate shouts rang through the halls.

I used my inhaler before gym today. Two goals in soccer! Note to Dr. Hernandez: "How am I doing, partner?"

I went to the library again. I tried to figure out why I was doing this. It didn't make any sense; it didn't seem right to me. It was like finding a stray puppy in the street and wanting to take it home. Only, this was no stray puppy.

Bill was there as usual. This time, he seemed almost happy to see me. "With all the time you spend in the library," he joked, "you must be a regular Albert Einstein." He laughed and started to cough. Funny I hadn't noticed that before: he had a bad cough.

"No, I'm no Albert Einstein," I said in return, "but I do want to be a doctor when I grow up. A great doctor. I want to find a cure for cancer."

"A doctor, huh?" asked Bill.

"Yeah. I have asthma, see," I explained. "When I was little, I had to go to the hospital a lot and take all kinds of medicine. I must have seen a million doctors. But Dr. Hernandez is the best. See, he treats me just like a partner. 'How's my partner on the asthma team?' he says. And he even calls me Dr. Whittaker. He's only joking, of course. But, still, he says he thinks I can manage my asthma myself, with Mom and Dad's help and with his help. It's a lot of work. I had to learn all about asthma. And I have to keep an asthma record—"

I stopped suddenly. Why am I telling him all this? I said to myself. He must think I'm crazy.

But he didn't. "Well, good luck to you, Dr. Whittaker," he said. "Maybe, someday I'll read about your winning the Nobel Prize for curing cancer. You never know. But I know one thing. You're not going to become a doctor by sitting around here talking to me all day long. Don't you have any homework to do?"

"Yeah, math," I complained.

"I used to be pretty good in algebra myself." He had that look in his eyes again. Like he was somewhere else, far away.

He seemed to drift away from me, away from the library, away from Woodburn. I didn't bother him again.

9:30: Deep breathing. Lights out.

Drifting away.

Thursday, December 1

Dear Diary,

You won't believe this, but Bill used to play football for Woodburn High. He told me he made the All-Conference Team in his senior year.

You see, I stopped by to tell him all about the karate club demonstration for the big sports dinner. We had the whole thing worked out now. "Michael and Robbie will begin with the basic karate stances. You know, like the front stance, the back stance, the horse stance, the crane stance, the cat stance, the square"—

"I get the idea," Bill interrupted.

"Okay. Then, Brian and Sarah will show some shifting techniques. Like hip shifting and forward circle stepping and—well, I guess you get that idea, too." Bill nodded in agreement. "Now, get this: Mark—he has CP, you know, cerebral palsy—well, at first, he didn't want to be one of The Empty Hands. 'What am I going to do?' he asked me. 'Run over people?' He's in a wheelchair, see. Well, I showed him how to do some hand punches—and, now, every time you see him, he's throwing a straight punch or a jab or a vertical fist punch. He thinks he's a regular Bruce Lee. Then, Jason, Jinx, and I will demonstrate karate kicks. We've been practicing back kicks and side kicks and round kicks and"—

"Kid," Bill said, "you're going a mile a minute. Slow down, or you'll bust a gut before you ever get to that awards dinner."

"I guess I am a little excited." I was even getting a little short of breath.

"A little? I'd say so." Bill was quiet for a minute. Then, he looked like he'd made up his mind about something. "You want to hear about excitement? Let me tell you about it. Excitement is the 1967 state football championship. It's Woodburn against Northpoint. College scouts in the stands. The biggest game of the year." Bill got that faraway look in his eyes. "The biggest game of my life."

"Were you there?" I asked.

Bill laughed a harsh, unhappy laugh. "Was I there? I was there, all right. I was the Woodburn quarterback, captain of the team. All Conference. I was the one headed for big things."

"Well, what happened?"

"What happened?" Bill got quiet again. "What difference does it make what happened? Just leave me alone, will you?"

9:00: Deep breathing. Lights out.

It's 1967. Woodburn against Northpoint. I'll bet that *was* some game.

Friday, December 2

Dear Diary,

Stopped by the library again today to see Bill.

He wasn't there.

9:15: Deep breathing. Lights out.

He just wasn't there.

Saturday, December 3

Dear Diary,

Still no sign of Bill today. Maybe he's sick. Or maybe worse. I decided to tell Mom and Dad about him.

"Scott," Mom said. "I'm surprised. You know better than to talk to strangers."

"But Bill isn't a stranger," I pleaded. "He grew up right here. Bill went to Woodburn High. He's not going to hurt anybody. He just hangs around the library."

"Your mother's right, Scott," Dad said.

"Because he's a bum," I grumbled.

"What?" asked Dad.

"You don't want me to talk to him because . . . because he's a bum. Right?"

"It doesn't sound like he's a bum. It sounds like he's homeless," said Mom.

"That's right," I said. "He said he lost his job and his home. He said he sleeps in a shelter. What is a shelter, anyway?"

"A shelter," Dad explained, "is . . . well, it's like a home for homeless people."

"Then, it must not be too nice a home," I observed. "Can't we help him?"

"Scott," Dad answered, "your Mom and I do a lot. We help with the food drive and donate clothing to the needy. But we can't feed and shelter all the homeless people by ourselves. Some homeless people are mentally ill. It's a big problem. There are thousands and thousands of homeless people."

"Maybe so," I said sullenly. "But Bill is just one."

"Well, maybe so," Mom said back. "But we still don't want you talking to strangers, homeless or not. It just isn't safe. Do you understand?"

"I guess so," I mumbled.

Grumpy, grouchy.

9:15: No deep breathing tonight. Lights out.

Understand? No, I don't understand.

Sunday, December 4

Dear Diary,

My asthma was bad today. I don't know what triggered it. Maybe it was the cold. All of a sudden, it feels like winter. And winter is *not* my season.

I knew it was coming when I felt what Dr. Hernandez says are the "early warning signs" of an asthma episode: coughing, sneezing, a scratchy throat. When I started to wheeze, I used my inhaler right away. It wasn't a really bad episode.

"Do you want me to call the doctor?" Mom asked.

"I think we can leave him out of this one," I said. "We can handle it."

Mom put an extra blanket on the bed tonight. I crawled under the covers and listened to the wind whistling and howling outside. I love that feeling.

Note to Mom: "Thanks."

9:00: Deep breathing. Lights out.

Like a bear in a cave, I thought.

Monday, December 5

Dear Diary,

My asthma was better today.

I saw Bill in the usual place at the library. I was happy and relieved to see him. But when I asked him where he'd been, he snarled at me: "Since when are you my keeper? Huh? Maybe you should just mind your own business."

I didn't say anything. I thought . . . well, I don't know what I thought.

9:15: Deep breathing. Lights out.

I thought we were friends.

Tuesday, December 6

Dear Diary,

What have I done? What am I going to do now?

It started at the planning committee today.

"No Doug Williams this year." Coach Kontos had struck out. "I should have known," he noted, "that he would be too busy on the day before a game."

"What about a retired athlete?" asked Dr. Mathewson.

"There's not much time," Mark observed.

"Maybe somebody local," suggested Coach Kontos.

"Well, we're open to ideas, Coach," Dr. Mathewson said. But we were stumped. "Now, of course, if we don't have a speaker, it wouldn't be the end"—

I interrupted her. Don't ask me why. There's a part of the doju kun that says, "Take advantage of opportunity." But I think

opportunity was taking advantage of me. "Bill Waters," I said. Well, I didn't really say it. It just sort of leaked out.

"What was that, Scott?" Coach Kontos asked.

"Bill Waters." This time I said it so he could actually hear it.

"Bill Waters? The old Woodburn High star? Say, whatever happened to him, anyway? Man, that kid could run. Why, Bill single-handedly beat Northpoint to win the '67 state championship for Woodburn. As long as I live, I'll never forget the ending of that game." Coach Kontos loves to tell old sports stories. But when he gets started, he's off to the races. "There was less than a minute left in the fourth quarter, Woodburn trailing by six"—

"Coach," Dr. Mathewson interrupted him. "Perhaps another time," she said to him gently. Then, she turned her attention to me. "What about Bill Waters?" she asked.

"I know him, sort of. He would make a good speaker." What was I saying? What did I think I was doing? Scott Whittaker, I thought, this stray puppy business is getting out of hand. Bill Waters, the Sports Awards Dinner speaker?

"And do you really think he will agree to speak?" asked Dr. Mathewson, with a note of hope in her voice.

"Well, uh . . ." Now what? I asked myself. Just say forget it, it won't work. I didn't even know if Bill would speak to *me* again. But I *couldn't* forget it. Somehow, I just couldn't. Always trust the spirit of karate, I heard a voice saying inside my head. "Well, I . . . uh . . . well, sure."

"Good. Have him call my office to make the arrangements." She gave me a card with her name and number on it.

"Great!" Coach Kontos exclaimed. "Now, get this. There was less than a minute in the fourth quarter . . ."

I didn't hear a word he was saying.

10:00: Wide awake. What *am* I going to do?

Wednesday, December 7

Dear Diary,

Have you ever seen Brenda Dubrowski angry? Really angry? It's like . . . it's like . . . well, it's not quite like anything else.

I was on my way to the library when she caught up with me. "Scott Whittaker, just what are you doing?"

"Walking," I replied. "Try it. You see, you put one foot out"—

"That's not what I mean," she cut me off, "and you know it. Where are you going?"

"To the library."

"*That's* what I mean!"

"Well, I have homework to do."

"Homework, schmomework. You're going to see that bum."

"He's not a bum. He's homeless."

"I don't care if he's the king of England. He's weird. And, now, you're getting weird, too. Don't you think everybody sees you talking to him all the time? Don't you know people are starting to talk about *you*? It's embarrassing to your whole family."

"Let them talk," I said back. "He's not weird. He just doesn't have a home."

"Well, that's weird enough for me!" Brenda shouted.

"But not for me!" I shouted back and stormed off.

When I got to the library, I was so upset I couldn't even look at Bill. Why was I trying to be friends with him? He wasn't very nice to me. A stray puppy would be grateful, at least.

For the first time, he came over to me. I didn't want to look at him. "Hey, kid," he said. "Sorry I barked at you. I didn't mean anything by it." I didn't say a word.

Then, as he started to walk away, I blurted it out: "Will you be the speaker at the Woodburn Sports Awards Dinner?"

A "Shhhh!" came from the librarian. Nothing came from Bill.

"Will you?" I said again, softly.

"Wait a minute, Scott," Bill said, sitting down next to me. "Start at the beginning. What's this all about?"

I explained the whole thing. "I'm in a jam."

Bill sighed and answered, "Scott, I can't be your speaker. I'm sorry. I . . . I just can't."

"Why?" I asked.

"Why? Why! C'mon, kid. Look at me. Take a good look. It's not a very pretty sight, is it?"

"I thought about that," I said excitedly. I reached into my backpack. "Here." I handed him a brown bag.

Bill looked inside and pulled out a clean shirt and tie. He looked at me suspiciously. "They're my Dad's," I explained.

"I can't wear these."

"It's a loan," I insisted.

"Thanks, kid. But, you know, it's not just that. I don't think you understand"—

"I understand plenty," I said angrily. "I understand you're homeless. But you weren't always homeless. Maybe someone will

remember what you were like in 1967. Maybe you could be a coach at Woodburn. Maybe"—

"And maybe I just don't want to do it. And maybe that's all."

"Bill," I began to say, but I could see it wouldn't do any good. Bill's eyes were closed. He was drifting away from me again. I stood up to go, but before I left, I put Dr. Mathewson's card in his hand. "If you change your mind" was all I said.

There's a tight feeling in my chest tonight.

9:00: Deep breathing. Lights out.

He was drifting away. Where does he go to? I wondered.

Thursday, December 8

Dear Diary,

That tight feeling was worse today. I was starting to wheeze and cough. I used my inhaler and took my morning medicine. I felt better after a while. It was a good thing, too, because I had to talk to Dr. Mathewson.

"Well, are The Empty Hands ready for Saturday night?" she asked when I entered her office.

"I guess so," I replied. I paused for a moment, then asked, "Dr. Mathewson, why are there so many homeless people?"

She was obviously surprised. It's quite a jump from karate to homeless people. "Well, that's a difficult question to answer, Scott. There are many reasons. Some homeless people used to live in places for the mentally ill. They may be unable to take better care of themselves. Some may be drug users or alcoholics. But many are poor, too poor to be able to afford housing. There

just aren't a lot of inexpensive places to live. And there *are* a lot of poor people."

"People who don't have jobs?" I asked.

"Some, yes," she continued, "but, nowadays, we see homeless people who *do* have jobs but don't make enough money to make ends meet. We see homeless families. Homeless children. It's a big problem, Scott."

"So I've heard."

We were quiet for a while. But Dr. Mathewson knew something was wrong. "What's this all about, Scott?" she asked.

I told her the whole truth. "Are you worried that Bill won't speak at the dinner?" she asked.

"That's part of it," I said.

"Well, don't worry about that," she assured me. "It's not the end of the world. We'll just let Coach Kontos tell a few of his memorable sports stories. Of course, we'll be lucky to get home before midnight." We both laughed. "Now, what's the rest of it?"

"I'm not sure," I said. The truth is, I wasn't sure.

"Maybe you're worried that Bill *will* speak?"

I asked her, "What do you mean?"

"Well, maybe . . . maybe you're worried what people will think when your speaker, the great sports hero, turns out to be one of Woodburn's homeless. Will you be embarrassed? Have you thought of that?"

No, I hadn't. "I don't think so," I said. "I'm not worried about that. I'm just worried about Bill. Maybe *he'll* be embarrassed."

9:00: Deep breathing. So much easier than this morning. Lights out.

Will I be embarrassed? Why hadn't I thought of that before?

Friday, December 9

Dear Diary,

Woke up feeling great this morning.

The Empty Hands practiced for over an hour. We wanted to be perfect. Dr. Mathewson let us use the Woodburn gym. Our dojo, she called it.

I didn't go to the library today. Why?

9:30: Deep breathing. Lights out.

One way or another, tomorrow *will* be a night to remember.

Saturday, December 10

Dear Diary,

I told you this was going to be a night to remember. Now, where do I start?

"Claire," Dad was hollering, "have you seen my blue-striped shirt? You know, my favorite one."

"Have you looked in the closet, dear?" Mom hollered back.

"Of course, I looked in the closet." Dad was walking from room to room, looking in closets, and mumbling and grumbling to himself. "Where does everything go to in this house?" I had a feeling he didn't want to know the answer to that. "Big night tonight, Scott," he said to me. He was even looking in *my* closet. "Are you excited?"

"You bet," I told him. That was the truth. Just don't ask *me* where things are, I thought.

"Claire," Dad was hollering again, "have you seen my new tie—you know, the one with the little blue golf clubs?"

"Honestly," Mom said, "you're worse than a child sometimes. It's probably right here on your tie rack." But it wasn't, of course.

"If it had been on my tie rack," Dad complained, "it would be around my neck right now!"

"I just don't know what you do with your things," Mom said, shaking her head. "Honestly."

"Where does everything go to in this house?" shouted Dad in utter frustration.

The awards dinner was held in the Woodburn gym. There was a stage for the presentation of awards. Big round tables had been set up for dinner. We sat with the Rileys.

Dr. Mathewson ran the show. There was a special award for the Woodburn Wildcats baseball team. It was their best season ever. Mark Riley, the team manager, accepted it. "And next year, we *will* beat those Panthers!" he said to the delight of everyone. There was an award for Mrs. Rothman, who organized an exercise program for the Woodburn senior citizen center. And there was even a "Special Service Award" for Coach Kontos, who had been coachng at Woodburn for 15 years.

"Let me see," he mused, "15 years ago. Why, I remember"—

Dr. Mathewson was a bit too quick for him. "How can we thank you enough, Coach Kontos? And now," she quickly went on, "a very special event. A demonstration of skill and daring by Woodburn's own karate club—I give you, The Empty Hands."

The karate demonstration was a real hit. (I used my inhaler before we went on. I wasn't going to take any chances tonight!) We began by asking everyone to do the rei, the traditional standing bow. Then we showed them our stuff. Showed *off* our stuff is more like it. The Empty Hands never looked better. When we finished our routines, we asked everyone to give the kiai, the karate shout. You should have heard that crowd!

It was time for the speaker. I figured Dr. Mathewson would just say a few words herself.

"Tonight, we have a very special guest with us," she began. "Someone who's been a part of Woodburn for many years. A part of Woodburn's athletic history and legacy."

So she found a new speaker after all, I figured. But I guess I figured wrong.

"Bill Waters was the State All-Conference quarterback who led Woodburn to the 1967 championship."

Did she say Bill Waters? I never, *never* figured he'd agree to speak. And, yes, you guessed it, I figured wrong again.

"It's been over 20 years since Bill went to Woodburn. It's been a long time since he won that state championship for us. It's been a long time for all of us. I hope we'll know how to show our appreciation. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Bill Waters."

And the crowd did show its appreciation. The applause was loud, and people's voices were so excited. "Bill Waters!" A real Woodburn legend. This was a nice surprise.

It was for a few moments, until Bill walked onto the stage from a side wing of the gym. He looked tired and ragged, but not quite as tired and ragged as usual. He even looked pretty good in Dad's blue-striped shirt and that silly tie with the blue golf clubs on it. Maybe too good because that's what caught Dad's eye. I saw Dad blinking in disbelief as he stammered, "My . . . my tie. That's my tie. And that's my shirt!" He looked down at me. "Scott," Dad said, "I think we're going to have a long talk about this."

The applause gave way to silence, except for a few gasps and whispers. "Is that Bill Waters?" This wasn't the Bill Waters they knew, not the Bill Waters they remembered. They remembered a high school senior with his whole future ahead of him.

Bill spoke so softly at first that it was hard to hear him. "My name is Bill, uh . . . William Waters. I went to—"

"Louder!" someone shouted from the crowd.

"My name is William Waters, and I went to Woodburn High School. Class of 1967." Bill paused for a moment. He was thinking about what to say next.

"I didn't really plan on being here tonight. I have a lot of good reasons not to be here. But a friend of mine asked me to speak tonight." Bill took a drink of water to clear his throat. "So that's why I'm here," he said.

He continued. "The year 1967 was a good one for me, and for lots of you, too. Remember Woodburn in '67. We didn't have a care in the world. That was before college and jobs and families." He stopped again, briefly. "That was before a lot of things," he said, pausing to look around the room. He seemed to get that faraway look in his eyes. I was afraid he'd drift away, drift away from the awards dinner altogether. But he shook it off somehow and returned to us.

"Football meant a lot to us then. The whole school would come to the games. Every Saturday afternoon. I used to love the excitement.

"I know you remember the big game. You probably remember it as well as I do. Woodburn was down by six with less than a minute to go. And no time-outs. We were driving, the ball on the Northpoint twenty. I called a reverse, but we got our signals

crossed—it was a broken play. I took that ball upfield myself. Broke three tackles. And threw myself across the goal line with seconds left. The extra point is good. Woodburn wins the state championship!"

"That's right!" someone shouted.

"A great game, a great game," people were saying.

Bill stopped for a minute before he began again. "That was a good time. But it was a long time ago, and things have changed for me since then. I guess you can see that. I like to think about those times, but I guess that's not such a good thing to be doing. It's just that those days were good for me." He looked for something else to say. "Anyway," he went on, "a friend of mine asked me to be here tonight, so that's why I came. Thank you."

There was complete silence at first. Then, someone started to applaud and soon everyone was applauding—and they were cheering, too. It was their way of saying thanks.

I thanked him, too, and shook his hand. But, boy, did he smell different. He was wearing some smelly stuff, like the kind my father used to wear (before we found out it might trigger an asthma episode). It sure was a good thing I had used my inhaler earlier. I just kept shaking Bill's hand till he said he'd like to keep it with him, if it was okay with me. Then, I asked him to eat dinner with my family. He said he wasn't sure, but I sort of dragged him over to our table to meet Mom and Dad.

Dad and Bill seemed to hit it off pretty well. I listened to them talk most of the night about football memories. (Dad didn't say a word about the shirt and tie. Thanks, Dad.) I listened to them remembering. I listened, and I wondered what it must have been like.

11:00: Lights out.

See: I told you. It *was* a night to remember.

Epilogue

I saw Bill again several days after that. He was always in the library. Always in the same place. But the holiday season kept me very busy. There was so much to do. I didn't really get to see that much of him.

One day, my Dad said he heard that Bill got a job over in Northpoint. He didn't know for sure, but I figured it was true because I didn't see Bill at the library anymore. I didn't see him again. I thought he'd say goodbye. But then, I thought, I guess he's not the type. That's the end of that, I said to myself.

Well, almost.

On Christmas Day, there were two packages on our front porch. Yes, they were from Bill. We opened them last. For my Dad's gift, Bill gave him back his shirt and tie. The little note read, "Thanks for the loan."

My gift was a funny little ornament wrapped in silver and gold foil. There was a message on it. It said, "The Nobel Prize in Medicine. Awarded to Scott Whittaker. He cured cancer."

I put it on the tree and said goodbye to Bill.

Questions for Scott

When I first found out I had asthma, I had a lot to learn and lots and lots of questions. Maybe you have questions, too.

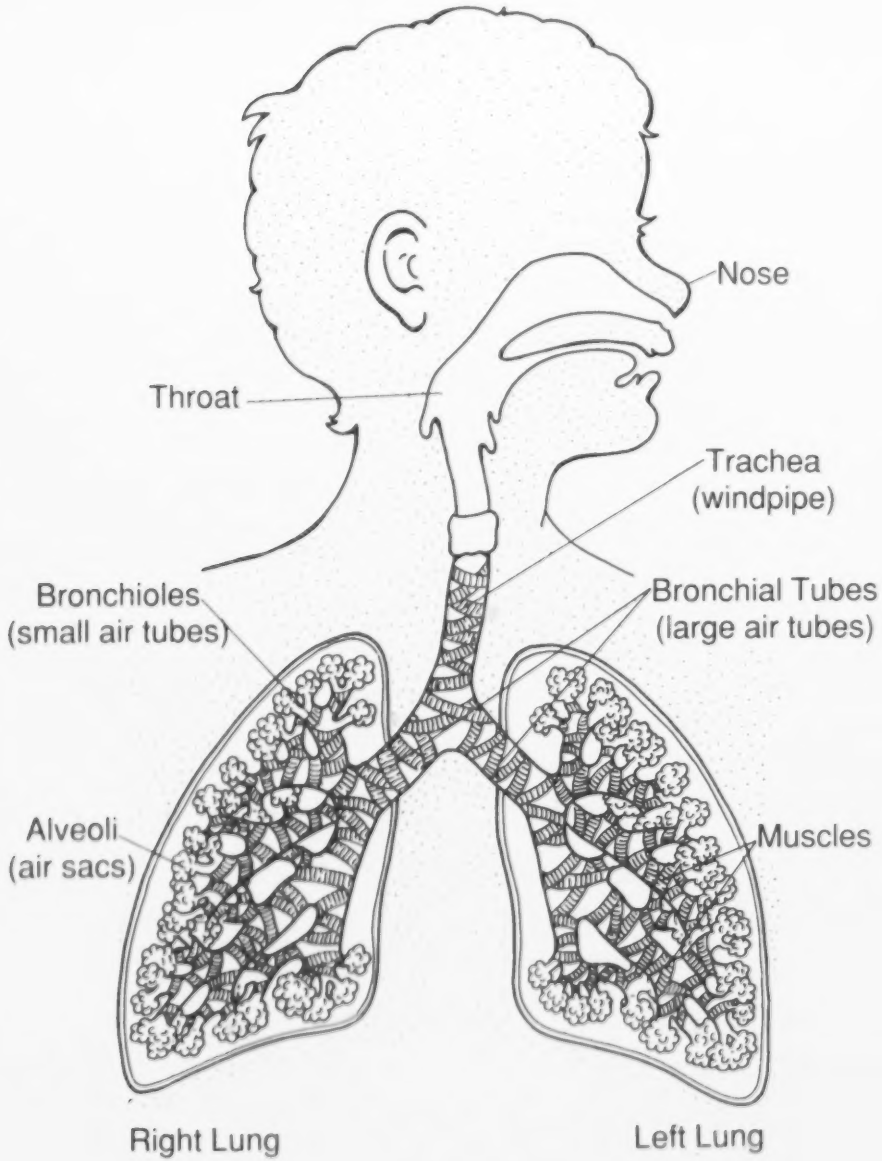
Q. What is asthma?

A. Asthma means that it's sometimes hard for me to breathe. When I have an asthma episode, the tubes that carry air in my lungs get real skinny. Then, my chest feels very tight, it's hard to breathe, I start to cough, and my breathing makes a whistling or wheezing sound.

You probably don't think much about how you breathe. But I've learned a lot about the body's breathing system (you know, the respiratory system) in order to understand what my asthma is all about. Breathing is really a way of giving your body the oxygen it needs to live. You get that oxygen through the air that enters your lungs. When you breathe in, air flows through your nose or your throat and down the trachea (that's your windpipe). Then, the air enters two large pathways called bronchial tubes, and from there it goes to many smaller tubes called bronchioles (say it like "bron-keyholes"). Finally, it goes to many, many air sacs called alveoli (say it like ravioli), where the oxygen enters the blood stream. Now, that oxygen will be carried to every part of your body.

Breathing is also a way of getting air out of the body. We breathe oxygen in and carbon dioxide out. See, breathing is like a two-way street. And asthma is like a traffic jam in your lungs. The air your body needs can't flow easily through your body's breathing tubes.

My Respiratory System

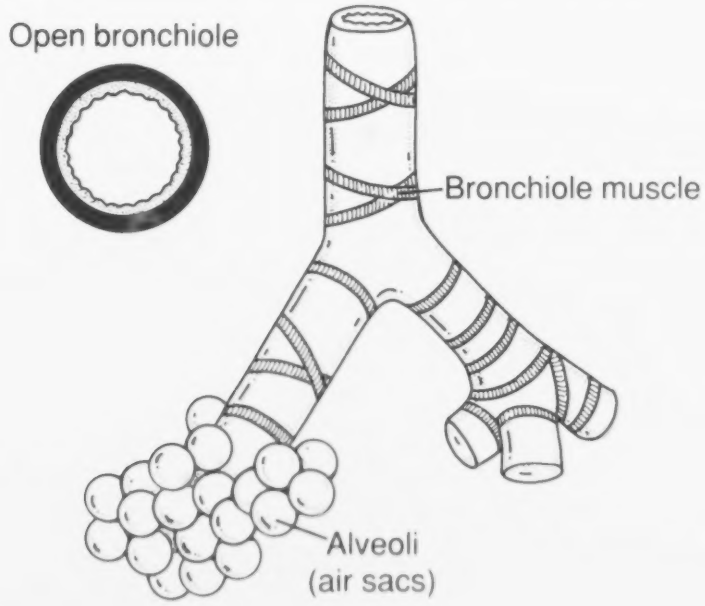


Q. What do you mean by an asthma episode?

A. An asthma episode is when my asthma gets bad. Some people call an episode an asthma "attack," like a heart attack or something. But it's not like that. Let me explain.

I have asthma all the time, but I don't have it bad all the time. So it's not always hard for me to breathe. It *is* hard when I have an asthma episode. What happens is that my little air tubes (those bronchioles, you remember) get narrow or blocked up, and it's not easy for air to pass through them. What makes my air tubes so tight during an asthma episode? Three things: 1) the muscles around my bronchioles get real stiff, and narrow the air passage; 2) the lining of the bronchioles swells, making the air tube even smaller; and 3) a thick fluid called mucus (like the

My Bronchioles Most of the Time . . .



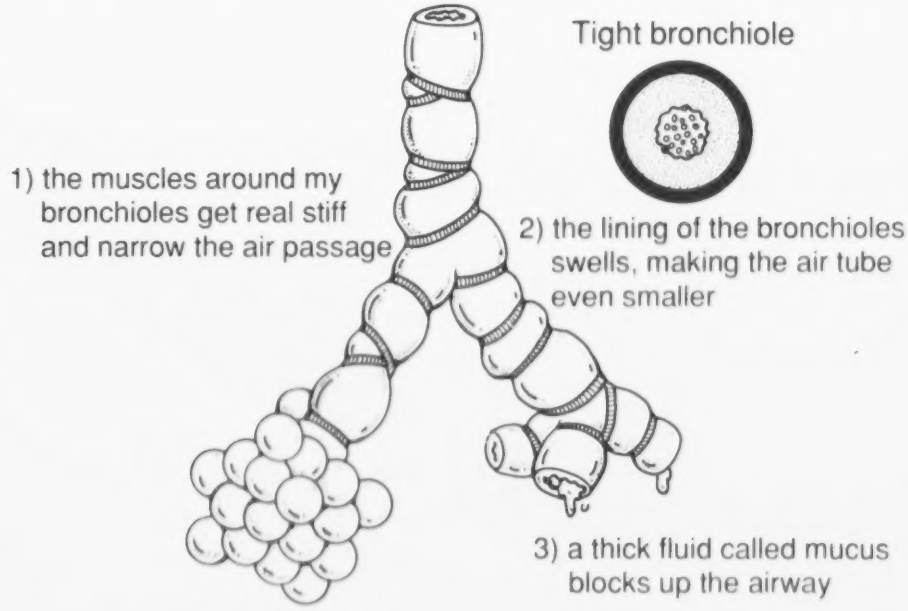
stuff in your nose when you have a cold) blocks up the airway. These things make it hard for me to breathe.

When I get asthma that bad, it's usually because I've been around something that makes it harder for me to breathe. The things that cause an asthma episode are called "triggers."

Different things trigger an episode for different people with asthma. Like exercise. Or real cold air. Having a cold or virus could trigger an episode. And, also, things that pollute the air, like smoke and dust. If you're allergic to something—animals or pollen or perfume—it might start an asthma episode.

I remember Brenda's birthday party, when she got a puppy from her friend Jason—and guess what I got: an asthma episode. But Brenda asked Jason to take the puppy away for a little while. And I didn't have to miss the cake and ice cream after all.

. . . and When I Have an Asthma Episode


Tight bronchiole
1) the muscles around my bronchioles get real stiff and narrow the air passage
2) the lining of the bronchioles swells, making the air tube even smaller
3) a thick fluid called mucus blocks up the airway

Q. What do you do when you have an episode?

A. First of all, I stay calm and take my medication. Next, I get rid of the trigger or get myself away from the trigger, if I can. It helps me relax if I take slow, deep breaths. (That's why I like to practice deep breathing.) I also drink plenty of warm liquids and get lots of rest.

Q. But isn't it scary?

A. It was at first. Really, really scary. I didn't know what was happening. It felt like I couldn't breathe, like I was choking. One time it was so hard for me to breathe that I had to be taken to the hospital in an ambulance. It was scary for my parents, too.

But the doctors explained asthma to us and showed us how to treat an episode. They told Mom and Dad not to baby me or treat me any differently from other kids. Sure, it's not fun having asthma, but my family and I have learned how to live with it. So it's not scary anymore.

Q. Is there a cure for asthma?

A. There is no cure, but there are many different kinds of medicines for the many different kinds of asthma. Some people take medicine every day. Others just take medicine when they think they will be near an asthma trigger, or when they plan on exercise, or when they feel the early warning signs of an episode. Still others (like me) get a daily dose plus a special dose when they need it.

I take several different kinds of medicine. They're called bronchodilators. It's a big name, I know, but they have a big job to do. A bronchodilator relaxes and opens up the air tubes in my lungs so I can breathe easily.

Asthma medication comes in many different forms, depending on how the medicine works best. I take my medication in pill form and by inhaler.

Q. What is an inhaler?

A. My inhaler is neat. I put it up to my mouth, pump it, and the medicine fills the inhaler balloon. See, like this:

I just breathe in the medication, right into my lungs. That way, it starts to work fast, and I'm ready to go!

Q. How old were you when you found out you had asthma?

A. I was about five years old. Once, when I was playing tag with my brother and sister, I had a real hard time breathing. My Mom and Dad had to take me to the hospital. Later, I went to see Dr. Hernandez. He is a special doctor who told me and my parents all about asthma. He even showed us a filmstrip about it. Dr. Hernandez explained why it was sometimes hard for me to breathe. He told us about triggers and the different kinds of asthma medicine. But, most of all, he wanted me to know that, with my parents' help, I would be able to take care of myself. He said asthma *was* serious and that I might have to do some things differently. But he also said that I didn't have to be afraid to try new things. If I took my medication and took care of myself, I would be just like any other kid.

Q. Why do you keep an asthma record?

A. Because it's important for me to be able to understand my asthma and to describe it to other people. You see, everybody's asthma is different, and it's important to take just the right kind and right amount of medicine. My asthma record helps me and my parents learn what triggers my episodes and what they are like. This helps the doctor know what kind of medication to prescribe for me.

Asthma is a serious condition. It's not just a bad cold or an allergy. And the medicines for asthma are serious, too. That's why it's so important for me to take the correct medicines *and* to take them correctly.

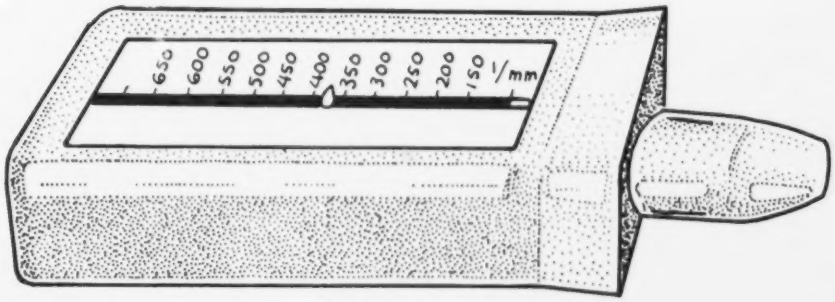
Q. If exercise triggers asthma, how can you play sports?

A. I just have to be careful, that's all. I don't exercise in real cold weather. If it's a little cold, I'll be sure to wear a scarf to warm the air I breathe. I always use my inhaler before exercise.

And I might use my peak flow meter to be sure it's okay for me to exercise.

Q. A peak flow meter? What's that?

A. A peak flow meter is an instrument you blow into, and it measures how well the air is flowing from your lungs. My "Lung Power Machine," I call it. It looks like this:



I just put my lips around the mouthpiece and blow out as hard and as fast as I can. If I get a good reading on the meter, it's game time! If my reading is low, it might mean an asthma episode is on the way.

Q. I heard you can make an episode happen. Is that true?

A. No. But it used to be that some parents and teachers, and even some doctors, thought that asthma was just a made-up condition, that kids might fake an episode to get extra attention or get out of something. Doctors now know that asthma is a real medical problem, that it can be serious, and that kids don't fake it. It's time everyone got that message.

Sometimes, getting very upset, angry, or afraid, or laughing or crying real hard, can bring on an episode. One time I had a geography test to take. I had been sick for a few days and was behind in class. So I was scared to take the test, just like you would be. And right before the test, my chest got tight and my breathing was fast and hard—well, you know, the way everyone feels before a big test. But, for me, that turned into an asthma episode. My teacher thought I just wanted to get out of the test, but I explained that I'd rather take a test (even a real hard one!) any day than have an asthma episode.

Q. Will you outgrow your asthma?

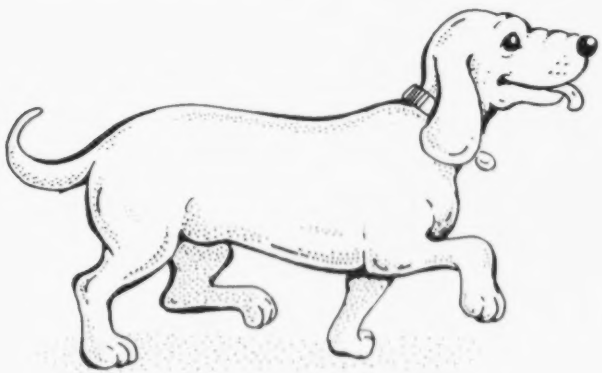
A. Dr. Hernandez says that the older I get, the larger my air passages will get. That will make it easier for me to breathe and my asthma may not bother me anymore.

But I don't worry too much about that, and I won't be real upset if I don't outgrow it. I'm busy doing too many other things right now. I take my medicine and stay away from triggers. And I plan to stay busy, asthma or no asthma.

Q. Isn't it terrible to have asthma?

A. Nope, it's just a part of me. I'm used to it. It meant some big changes for me and my family at first. My sister couldn't keep her dog (I liked Muster, too!). Mom and Dad had to stop fixing up old furniture in the basement because the chemicals they used to remove paint triggered my asthma. There were lots of other changes, too. Now, we have a monthly meeting to talk about how we can manage my asthma better as a family.

Don't feel too bad for Muster. He's just down the block, and Megan visits him almost every day.



About The Kids on the Block

Founded in 1977 by Barbara Aiello, The Kids on the Block puppet program was formed to introduce young audiences to the topic of children with disabilities. Since then the goals and programs of The Kids on the Block have evolved and broadened to encompass a wide spectrum of individual differences and social concerns.

Barbara Aiello is nationally recognized for her work in special education. The former editor of *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Ms. Aiello has won numerous awards for her work with The Kids on the Block, including the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped Distinguished Service Award, the Easter Seal Communications Award for Outstanding Public Service, and the Epilepsy Foundation of America's Outstanding Achievement Award. Her puppets have appeared in all 50 states and throughout the world. In addition, over 1,000 groups in the United States and abroad make The Kids on the Block puppets an effective part of their community programs.

For More Information

The Kids on the Block
9385-C Gerwig Lane
Columbia, Maryland 21046
800-368-KIDS

American Lung Association
Check your telephone directory for a local affiliate of the American Lung Association.

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
1717 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Suite 305
Washington, D.C. 20036
1-800-7-ASTHMA: Hotline for questions about medication, referrals, camps

National Foundation for Asthma/ Tucson Medical Center
P.O. Box 42195
Tucson, AZ 85733
602-323-6046
Booklets on asthma and allergy sent free upon request

National Institutes of Health
900 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892
301-496-4000
Ask for information on asthma and your call will be transferred to the appropriate office.

National Jewish Center for Immunology and Respiratory Medicine
1400 Jackson St.
Denver, CO 80206
1-800-222-LUNG: Lung Line, a hotline for questions about respiratory problems

Mothers of Asthmatics
10875 Main St., Suite 210
Fairfax, VA 22030
703-385-4403
Monthly newsletter on asthma

Scott Whittaker in

Hometown Hero

There's more to Scott than asthma. There's karate, bike riding, and Thanksgiving dinner. And there's Bill Waters: one of Woodburn's homeless people—and, now, one of Scott's friends.

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